ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
(OR-030-99-022)

BLM OFFICE: Vale
PROPOSED ACTION: Temporary nonrenewable Grazing Application
LOCATION OF PROPOSED ACTION: West Cow Creek Allotment (#20902)
APPLICANT: Mahogany Creek Grazing, Richard Fillmore, Lequerica Bros. Inc., Martin Andre, Glen Caywood, and Fred Eiguren (permittees)

CONFORMANCE WITH APPLICABLE LAND USE AND ACTIVITY PLANS

This proposed action is subject to the following land use and activity plans:
Name of Plan: Southern Malheur MFP (1983)
Southern Rangeland Program Summary (RPS) (1984)
West Cow Creek Allotment Management Plan (AMP)/Evaluation

The plans have been reviewed to determine if the proposed action conforms with the land use plan terms and conditions as required by 43 CFR 1610.5. Within the Southern Malheur RPS and West Cow Creek AMP, the primary management objectives for the pastures are to maintain the crested wheatgrass seeding condition.

REMARKS

This environmental assessment will serve to meet NEPA requirement. This project is in conformance with the MFP and RPS and the objectives of improving and maintaining vegetative and soil conditions to benefit watershed, wildlife and livestock. This document will not address permanent increases in forage allocations, as projected in the Southern Malheur MFP, that may result from improved management and stewardship. The present EA only considers temporary forage surpluses that recur at irregular but elevated levels. Applicable grazing regulations provide that nonrenewable grazing permits or leases may be issued on an annual basis to qualified applicants when forage is consistent with multiple-use objectives and does not interfere with existing livestock operations on the public lands (43 CFR 4130.6-2).

NEED FOR PROPOSED ACTION

A grazing application was received from the West Cow Creek permittees requesting temporary nonrenewable (TNR) grazing permits for 2,309 animal unit months (AUMs) of additional forage covering 56,982 acres, including 9 seeded pastures (i.e., crested wheatgrass).
The proposed action considers requests made by permittees to make beneficial use of surplus available forage resulting from one or more of the following conditions:(1) seasonably lower mean temperatures and higher mean precipitation preceding the active growing season; (2) additional rangelands made

accessible to livestock use by the construction/implementation of such range improvements as pipelines, livestock waters, fencing, and vegetative manipulations; (3) seedings following wildfires that have replaced indigenous or exotic annual plant communities with highly adaptable, grazing tolerant exotic species (i.e., crested wheatgrass); and (4) management strategies that periodically provide pasture rest or deferment from grazing resulting in a gradual increase in plant vigor and forage productivity.

Additional forage production of crested wheatgrass, when available, is best grazed to reduce the potential of increasing non-palatable, decadent plants (i.e., "wolf" plants) thereby reducing the long-term health and productivity of the seeding. Grazing additional forage production would provide tangible benefits for both the applicants and the BLM by reducing fine fuels which reduces wildfire danger. Lastly, the TNR AUMs applied for are suspended AUMs within the permitted use of the allotment.

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

A. Proposed Action

The proposed action would be to authorize temporary nonrenewable grazing use for 2,309 AUMs (approximately 20% of Permitted Use) over approximately a 60 day period (from October 15 to December 15) in the Owyhee Butte 1, Owyhee Butte 2, Owyhee Butte 3, Owyhee Butte 4, Bogus Creek Seeding, Arock, Spray, Navaro V, and Dog Lake West pastures of the West Cow Creek allotment (see attached map). The proposed action provides for extended/ expanded grazing authorizations for one or both of the following purposes: (1) grazing use in excess of authorized active permitted use, and (2) grazing use outside or beyond the permitted use season.

The Jordan Resource Area proposes to authorize Temporary Nonrenewable livestock grazing on the West Cow Creek allotment when:

- utilization studies would clearly indicate an annual surplus of available forage,

- the requested use would not occur in an intensively managed pasture that has been scheduled for rest in that grazing year,

- the cumulative utilization level on seeded ranges would be less than 60 percent of the current year's production,

- temporary nonrenewable grazing permits may be issued if the conditions specified in 43 CFR 45130.6-2 are met i.e., forage is temporarily, use is consistent with multiple-use objectives, use does not interfere with existing livestock operations, and consultation, cooperation, and coordination with affected permittees, the state, and the interested public has occurred,

- tangible benefits can be readily demonstrated for both the applicants and the managing agency (e.g. reduction in fine fuels to decrease fire danger),

- areas where TNR use would occur are seeded with Crested Wheatgrass resulting from fire rehabilitation or ranges dominated by annual grasses and forbs,

- temporary, nonrenewable authorizations shall not be the basis for recurrent or renewed annual applications in succeeding years;

- temporary, nonrenewable use would not be considered for specific areas within pastures that fall within special designation or management areas as described below.

Certain lands within the West Cow Creek allotment are excluded from this EA. These include all Wilderness Study Areas (WSA's), Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC's), and other lands under special designations, lands managed under current fire rehabilitation plans, and riparian areas subject to specific management stipulations.

The proposed action would require elevated levels of use supervision, monitoring, and field inspections. Final inspections would be conducted when the livestock permanently exit the allotment in order to document cumulative use levels.

B. Alternative 1 - No Action

This alternative would be denial of the TNR application which would result in no grazing beyond the authorized active permitted use. This alternative would also limit specialized management opportunities for the authorized officer. Excess crested wheatgrass production would remain thus facilitating an increase in wolf plants. Long-term production and seeding health would be expected to decrease. And, tangible benefits which could be readily demonstrated for both the applicants and the managing agency (e.g. reduction in fine fuels to decrease fire danger) would be lost.

AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

The affected pastures include Owyhee Butte 1 (4,215 acres), Owyhee Butte 2 (2,713 acres), Owyhee Butte 3 (2,090 acres), Owyhee Butte 4 (3,162 acres), Bogus Creek Seeding (4,819 acres), Arock (16,048 acres), Spray Field (8,934 acres), Navaro V (10,893) and Dog Lake West (5,989 acres) pastures. These pastures consist of homogenous crested wheatgrass seedings in good condition with little to some big sagebrush (Artemisia tridentata wyomingensis). However, wolf plants are noticeably increasing in portions of the Owyhee Butte pastures, Arock, Spray Field, and Dog Lake West pastures. The management objective for these pastures is to maintain the crested wheatgrass seeding condition thus relieving grazing pressure on native ranges.

On average, livestock grazing in these pastures during the authorized grazing season is approximately 14.9 acres per AUM. Grazing distribution is, typically, good and average utilization rates do not exceed 35%. Pasture deferment is a grazing system standard adhered to on the allotment.

Historically, the area supported, predominantly, a big sagebrush/bluebunch wheatgrass community. However, considerable portions of those rangelands burned by wildfires or were historically over-grazed resulting in invasion by cheatgrass, an exotic annual. Many of these areas have been seeded to crested wheatgrass creating monocultures which tend to be persistent in time with re-invasion by natives being generally slow. Crested wheatgrass stands do not offer the structural and compositional diversity that characterizes good wildlife habitat , therefore do not generally support the complexity and diversity of wildlife species that native stands do.

Microbiotic crusts (i.e., cryptogamic or cryptobiotic) consists of algae, lichen, fungi, mosses, cyanobacteria and bacteria growing on or just below the soil surface. Microbiotic crust are known to aide is soil stabilization, water infiltration, soil fertility and nutrient cycling. The scientific literature generally reports that livestock grazing could have negative impacts on microbiotic crusts. Degree of impact to crusts is primarily a function of season of use while recovery from impact varies greatly by species. Overall, early winter grazing was found to have the least impact, whereas late winter grazing does not allow enough time for the microbiotic crust to begin to stabilize before water limited algal and lichen growth.

In general, the area lies in the 10 to 12 inch precipitation zone and consists of gently sloping and rolling lava plateau uplands underlain by recent basaltic flows. Three dominant soil types exist in the area: 1) shallow, clayey, very stony and well drained, 2) shallow, clayey, well drained soils similar to 1) but are less stony and generally have thicker silty surface layers, and 3) very shallow, very stony, rocky well drained, gravelly loam soils located on slightly steeper slopes.

Wildlife habitat within the affected area historically supported such species as sage grouse, mule deer, and pronghorn antelope. These species are heavily dependent upon sagebrush which was eliminated by wildfires and crested wheatgrass seedings. These pastures are presently within mule deer winter range and year-long pronghorn antelope habitat. Other species which inhabit the area include coyote, badger, ground squirrels, chipmunks, whiptail lizard, Utah lizard, gopher snake, and western rattlesnake. Common avian species in the area include horned larks, meadow larks, sage sparrows, sage thrashers, ravens, red-tailed hawks, rock wrens and burrowing owls.

The allotment contains two Wilderness Study Areas (WSA): Clarks Butte , 0r-3-120, and Lower Owyhee Canyon, Or-3-110. The Jordan Craters ACEC is located within the Clarks Butte pasture (native pasture). Several of the affected pastures border the Owyhee Wild and Scenic River corridor.

Bogus Lake/Creek is a stream in the allotment. Bogus Creek is fenced into 3 riparian pastures which are minimally grazed during the early spring period. However, the Spray Field pasture has one water-gap which extends about 300 feet along the creek.

Dispersed outdoor recreation in the allotment occurs mainly within the WSAs and ACEC. Recreation consists predominantly of hiking and primitive camping. Hunting consists of pronghorn antelope and upland game birds (chuckars and sage grouse). Antelope, chuckars, and sage grouse habitat is predominantly located in the native sage brush/bluebunch wheatgrass pastures within the allotment. Preferred habitat of the game species is represented by native vegetative constituents instead of monoculture stands of crested wheatgrass.

No threatened or endangered wildlife or plant species occur within the pastures.

MANDATORY ELEMENTS

Critical Elements	**YES**	**NO**
Air Quality		X
ACECs		X
Cultural Resources		X
Farmlands, Prime/Unique		X
Floodplains		X
Nat.Amer.Rel. Concerns		X
T&E Species		X
Wastes, Hazardous/Solid		X
Water Quality		X
Wetlands/Riparian Zones		X
Wild & Scenic Rivers		X
Wilderness		X

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES (Proposed Action)

Short-term environmental impacts would include the removal of annual residual above-ground biomass from mostly dormant crested wheatgrass plants. This would decrease the occurrence of wolf plants or would, at a minimum, decrease the rate of wolf plant formation.

The projected average stocking rate would increase from 14.9 to 9.3 acres per AUM, in the affected pastures. The crested wheatgrass plants would be mostly dormant during the period of use thus no impacts to plant reproduction or vigor would be expected. Given average livestock utilization levels during the normal grazing season (<35%), the average, cumulative utilization levels shall not exceed 60% with the additional authorization of 2,309 AUMs.

Because average use levels following TNR authorization would not exceed established maximums (i.e., 60% for crested wheatgrass), watershed characteristics would not be impacted because adequate residual cover would exist. Moreover, watershed functionality would not be degraded because most livestock water sources are water troughs along pipelines.

Below maximum utilization levels would minimize any potential wildlife-livestock forage competition. Similarly, foraging and nesting habitat or cover for upland game species would not be impacted because the habitat typically does not extend into the "artificial" plant communities primarily affected by issuance of TNR. During fall, cooler air temperatures and decreased insect occurrence would result in livestock being widely dispersed and well distributed thereby reducing soil compaction from trampling. Cryptobiotic crusts are most notable in native sagebrush/grasslands in high serial conditions, rather than exotic monocultures. These crusts are not expected to be damaged by livestock grazing or associated trampling. Equally important, use under the Proposed Action would occur in seasons or the year (primarily fall and winter) when cryptobiotic crusts are least vulnerable to damage. Long term impacts would include maintenance in the crested wheatgrass seeding condition thereby potentially lessening impacts to native grass pastures.

Overall, the issuance of TNR would impact 27% of the West Cow Creek allotment with a 20% increase in active permitted use AUMs, consequently accumulative impacts are negligible. Additionally, the issuance of TNR would not interfere with existing livestock operations (i.e., succeeding years use) and, most importantly, there are no known irreplaceable or irretreivable impacts.

The proposed TNR use would not affect the Clarks Butte WSA or the Jordan Craters ACEC. The Lower Owyhee Canyon WSA boundary coincides with the Owyhee River canyon rim thus this WSA is not accessible to grazing. The affected pastures which border the Owyhee Wild and Scenic River corridor have a physical barrier (i.e., rim rock) that prohibits livestock from entering the Owyhee canyon. Therefore, no livestock grazing in the West Cow Creek allotment (active permitted use or TNR authorization) would impact the Owyhee Wild and Scenic River.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES (Alternative 1 "No Action")

Denial of the TNR application would result in excessive crested wheatgrass production remaining in these pastures. The short term impacts include increased lignification of plant leafy material which significantly reduces palatability and digestibility for livestock and wildlife.

Livestock operators in the allotment would suffer economic disadvantages. Opportunities to convert primary production to animal products with minimal environmental consequences would be diminished. Some additional vegetative material would be available for reintegration into the ecosystem through nutrient cycling and detritus food chains. Use of TNR as a management option or application for specific resource needs such as fire control, would be unavailable.

In the long term, increased wolf plant frequency would reduce overall health and productivity of the crested wheatgrass seedings. Moreover, the presence of wolf plants would create an unbalanced forage use pattern. For example, a wolf plant would not be grazed while a non-wolf plant, immediately adjacent, would sustain an 80% use level. This long term impact would increase through time consequently resulting in less useable forage within the seedings. Accumulative impacts would result from long term impacts of less available forage production in the crested wheatgrass seedings thereby potentially increasing use levels on native grass pastures.

DESCRIPTION OF MITIGATION MEASURES AND RESIDUAL IMPACTS

The authorization of 2,309 total temporary nonrenewable AUMs would require additional periodic monitoring of average annual utilization and distribution to insure management objectives and utilization criteria (i.e. 60% for crested wheatgrass) are met.

If maximum utilization levels are met before the end of the temporary authorization period, the livestock shall be removed from the pasture and/or allotment.

PERSONS/AGENCIES CONSULTED

West Cow Creek Allotment Permittees
Jon Sadowski - Wildlife Biologist
Alice Bronsdon - Archeologist
Tom Christensen - Outdoor Recreation Planner
David Wallace - Rangeland Management Specialist
Tom Forre - Rangeland Management Specialist

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACTS

I have reviewed EA, OR-030-99-022 and determined that the proposed action with the mitigating measures will not have any significant impacts on the human environment and that an EIS is not required. I have determined that the proposed project is in conformance with the land use plan.

S/Thomas G. Forre, Acting
Authorized Official

08/30/99
Date

DECISION/RATIONALE

I have determined that implementation of the proposed action and mitigation to authorize 2,309 Temporary Nonrenewable AUMs in the West Cow Creek allotment outlined in EA OR-030-99-022 is in conformance with the land use plan for the Jordan Resource Area and the proposed project will aide in maintaining crested wheatgrass seeding condition.

My decision is to authorize up to 2,309 Temporary Nonrenewable AUMs within the West Cow Creek allotment (#20902).

S/Jerry L. Taylor
Authorized Official

09/20/99
Date